What Is A Christian?

How You Can Know Christ

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Believers in Jesus were first called Christians at Antioch (Acts 11:26). The testimony of Jesus as the Christ (Messiah) was so strong in Antioch (the largest city of the Roman province of Syria and a center for missionary activity) that His followers and disciples were identified as Christians (a term of derision in the earliest days of the church meaning "of the family of Christ" but eventually, followers of Christ came to love and adopt this name).

Today, Christian has a much broader and often entirely different meaning than its initial use. Many believe a Christian is someone who merely goes to church, believes in God, lives a good life, or tries to keep the commandments. While it is true that such things as attending church, water baptism, living a godly lifestyle, and a loving attitude should definitely be marks of a believer, these should never be misconstrued as the criteria for someone becoming a Christian. We must examine Scripture and, based upon its authority, determine what it really means to come to faith in Jesus Christ.

Not by Works

According to Scripture, doing good works or keeping God's Law does not make someone a Christian. The apostle Paul explains that one of the purposes of the Law in the Tanakh (Old Testament), which is based upon the Ten Commandments, was to show us that we all are sinners and can never achieve the standards required by God. Because of our sinful nature, we continually fall short of the mark. This dilemma reveals our need for a Savior:

> By the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin (Romans 3:20).
>
> Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we

may be justified by faith (Galatians 3:24).

> Therefore they said to Him, "What shall we do, so that we may work the works of God?" Jesus answered and said to them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent" (John 6:28-29).

Paul makes it clear that God's righteousness can only be obtained through faith, and that Israel did not attain it because they sought it not by faith, but by works:

> What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it.
>
> Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the "stumbling stone."
>
> As it is written: "See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame" (Romans 9:33 NIV).

But by Faith

It is by faith in Jesus Christ, therefore, that we are saved. He is the stone mentioned in the above passage. Those who reject Him stumble and fall; those who trust in Him are saved.

2 Timothy 1:9:

> [God] who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity.

Titus 3:4-7:

> But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly

through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Nothing is more tragic than someone pursuing a false hope of salvation through his or her good works and self-effort when Jesus offers true salvation as a free gift. The apostle Paul writes:

> For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast (Ephesians 2:8-9).
>
> We maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law (Romans 3:28).
>
> We know that a man is not justified by observing the Law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the Law, because by observing the Law no one will be justified (Galatians 2:16 NIV).
>
> For I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the Law for righteousness to everyone who believes (Romans 10:2-4).

Only through the shed blood of Jesus Christ is forgiveness available and a restored relationship with the Father made possible. Only Christ is the perfect sacrifice and substitute that satisfies a holy and just God.

2 Corinthians 5:21:

> He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

Colossians 1:22:

> He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach.

Although we are all guilty of sin and rebellion, when we put our faith in Jesus Christ, His perfect righteousness is applied to our lives.

We become acceptable to God solely through faith in Christ's sacrificial death—"without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Hebrews 9:22). The animal sacrifices in the Hebrew Scriptures were merely a foreshadowing of the death of God's Son on the cross.

> For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God (1 Peter 3:18 NIV).

So Jesus paid the penalty for our sins; He suffered and died in our place. We don't have to "perform" for God out of fear and guilt, but are now free to serve and obey Him because we know and love Him.

That is why the apostle Paul could so boldly say:

> If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless. But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith (Philippians 3:4-9).

Paul also said in Acts 20:24:

> But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.

Faith and

Works

Good works done after accepting Christ spring from a heart of gratitude. Because of what the Lord accomplished on the cross, a believer is enabled to do good deeds. These acts are the fruit and result of salvation, not the cause of it.

Paul emphasizes that we are not justified by moral and ceremonial acts performed in obedience to the Law, but through faith in Christ. James, however, places emphasis on good works that flow out of true Biblical faith. He stresses that we are not justified merely by barren orthodoxy—which even the demons possess and shudder as a result (James 2:19), but by true faith that produces works (James 2:14-26).

Paul and James are in agreement. Paul concurs that the faith which saves ultimately results in good works—"deeds appropriate to repentance" (Acts 26:20; see also Ephesians 2:8-10).

The Bible is therefore clear. We are not saved by dead faith (James 2:17) nor by dead works (Hebrews 6:1; 9:14), but by a living faith which results in "love and good deeds" (Hebrews 10:24).

In summary, the apostle Paul tells us we are saved totally by faith and as a result of that saving faith, good works follow. James agrees that the proof of saving faith is works of righteousness. Works flow out of one's inner heart—one's nature, and that nature can only be changed by God's grace. The new birth is a work from above—not the work of man (John 1:12-13).

An interesting account in the Gospels tells of Zacchaeus, a chief tax collector, welcoming Jesus to his home—an act of faith and acceptance. Zacchaeus then shows the fruit of faith by promising to give half his possessions to the poor and paying back fourfold anyone he had cheated. Jesus said to him:

> Today salvation has come to this house…. For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost (Luke 19:9-10).

There is an important balance between grace and obedience:

> Works are the unmistakable evidence of the loyalty of the heart; they express either belief or unbelief, faithfulness or unfaithfulness. The judgment [Revelation 20:11-15] will reveal whether or not one's loyalties were with God and the Lamb or with God's enemies.[1]

God's Righteousness

We cannot expect to be accepted by God because of our own goodness. Romans 3:23 points this out emphatically: "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." This does not mean that we cannot do good, but according to God's standard of righteousness, we all miss the mark.

In all the religions of the world, there are people seeking to establish their own righteousness to earn salvation. In Biblical Christianity, however, it is the righteousness of Jesus Christ which makes possible salvation as a free gift, through faith, to those who will receive it.

> For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes.... For in the gospel a righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith" (Romans 1:16-17 NIV).

The Hebrew Scriptures comment concerning Abraham:

> Then he believed in the lord; and He credited it to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:6).

(See Romans chapter four for additional insight on Abraham being justified by faith.)

Religion vs. Relationship

The world is filled with religions, but salvation is found *only* in Jesus Christ. Scripture tells us:

> And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12).

Religion is an attempt to reach God through human effort, traditions and ideas, but true Christianity is having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Religion is what one does for God, but salvation is what God has done for us:

> ... that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them (2 Corinthians 5:19 NIV).

Because Jesus Christ is God's unique revelation of salvation, He (as recorded in the Gospel of John) could honestly say:

> I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through Me (John 14:6).

Some people have just enough religion to make them miserable. While they know the "language" and go through all the "motions," they have never known the joy and peace of having a real and personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Nobody is more miserable than the person trying to *be* a Christian in his or her own strength, and many have, therefore, turned away from what they thought was Christianity, but in truth is not.

A man I once knew had attended church all his life but was never taught that he could know Christ in a real and personal way. Being

disillusioned with what he thought was Christianity, he began searching for answers in Eastern religions. He felt God was impersonal and unknowable. I showed him numerous Scriptures that proved to him that God does want us to know Him and have a personal relationship with Him. God's Word helped clarify for him the true meaning of being a Christian. He realized that this was what he had always longed for.

Know the Lord

I shared the following illustration with a couple (the husband had cancer and didn't have much time to live) who were religious, and knew about God, but they didn't know the Lord in a *personal* way. I said, "If a stranger would walk in your front door and say, 'Hi, I'm home! I'm going up to my room,' you would respond by quickly saying, 'I don't know who you are. Get out of here!' However, if one of your own children walked in and said the same thing, you would say, 'Glad to see you! Come on in!' "

In the Bible, Jesus said there will be those who think they are His children because they go to church or profess to believe in Him, but when they stand before Him, He will in essence say, "Get out of here. I never knew you—you are not My child" (Matthew 7:21-23). In contrast, Jesus will say to those He knows, "I know you. You are mine—enter into the joy of your Lord."

I assured them that we can have certainty, here and now, what type of greeting we will receive when we meet the Lord. I shared the words of Paul in 2 Timothy 1:12, "… I know Whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day."

On another occasion while buying blueberries at a farm, the young woman selling them told me about the recent death of her father. She was still grieving, so I asked if her father knew the Lord. I wanted to gain some insight in an attempt to provide her some hope and encouragement. She said, "Yes, he made his peace with God." I asked, "How about you?" She informed me she went to church but was not close to the Lord.

I said to her, "You can tell me about your father and even show me pictures, and although I can know all about him, I will never have a personal relationship with him like you had." I continued, "Most people who go to church know about God like I would about your father, but God wants us to know Him in a personal way as you knew your father." Her eyes lit up as she told me that this is what she desired.

After prayer, she hugged me as tears streamed down her face. She said, "This was not a chance meeting; I was meant to talk to you."

It is interesting to note that the Greek word for "know" (*ginosko*), used when Jesus said, "I never knew you; depart from Me..." (Matthew 7:23) is the very same word used for "know," which was used by Mary when she said to the angel Gabriel, who had come to announce the birth of Jesus, "How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?" (Luke 1:34 KJV). She never had an intimate relationship with a man. The same Greek word for "know" was used again when Jesus said:

> This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent (John 17:3).

Scripture teaches that we must know the Lord by having an intimate and personal relationship with Jesus Christ. A Christian is someone who has a restored relationship with God the Father through a personal faith and acceptance of His Son Jesus and His finished work on the cross. True Christianity is not a lifeless, external

form of religion, but a living, vital, personal relationship with the Creator of the universe who is knowable and seeks to be known.

New Lordship

Before I became a Christian, I was my own god, running my life my own way. I didn't want anyone, including God, telling me what to do. When I came to faith in Jesus Christ, however, I submitted to His Lordship, and the throne of my life has now been restored to its rightful King. While rebellion and pride used to separate me from God, the peace I now have with God has been made possible by His own provision—His Son Jesus Christ. Romans 5:1 puts it this way:

> Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

To be justified means to be declared righteous. God now forgives us and accepts us because of the imputed righteousness of Christ. His righteousness, in effect, becomes our righteousness.

The qualifying factor for us to be pardoned by God's forgiveness and declared righteous by Him is that we "believe in" the Lord Jesus Christ. Following an amazing chain of events, the Philippian jailer asked Paul and Silas, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:30-31).

Romans 10:9-10 states:

> ... that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation.

A Greek word study will reveal that to "believe in" means to be persuaded of, and hence, to trust in, rely on, and be faithful to. To

"believe in" is not merely acknowledging the reality of Christ, but a *belief* that results in your accepting His provision of salvation, having confidence in Him as the only way of salvation, and committing your life and eternal destiny to Him. It means trusting Him as your Savior and obeying Him as your Lord.

John 1:12 promises:

> But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name.

Feelings

When you give your life to Christ, the feelings may or may not be there, but the *fact* remains—you are now forgiven and beginning a new life in Christ. Feelings are merely the emotional response as you realize and appreciate what God has done for you in Jesus Christ and what the Holy Spirit has begun in your life.

If you obtain a marriage license and get married, you may or may not feel differently. It does not matter how you feel. The fact is that you are now married! It is the same with God; by faith one receives God's forgiveness and restoration in Christ, and according to God's Word, a new life and relationship begins.

1 John 5:11-12 assures us:

> And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. The one who has the Son has the life; the one who does not have the Son of God does not have the life.

New Creation

Jesus said to Nicodemus in John 3:3:

> Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Jesus informed Nicodemus, a Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin, that one could not see or enter the Kingdom of God without spiritual rebirth. One must be "born again" or "born from above."

Ephesians 2:4-5 states:

> But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved).

2 Corinthians 5:17 (NKJV) says:

> Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.

This does not mean that once you accept Christ you become perfect and no longer sin. It does mean that your attitude of rebellion and self-centeredness begins to change to one of obedience and Christ-centeredness. You begin growing and maturing in this new life as you develop a whole new way of thinking and acting. As you yield and submit to Jesus Christ through obedience to His Word and Spirit, He begins to mold and direct your life. He starts working in and through you to fulfill God's ultimate goal for your life —being conformed to the image of His Son (Romans 8:29; 2 Corinthians 3:18).

How good it is to know that your new birth is only the beginning of your new relationship with the Lord and the commencement of a continual growth process in your new life. You now have the assurance from Scripture that God "is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13), and that "he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6 NIV).

The Book of Life

This world is not all there is to life. Jesus Christ will return as the victorious King of kings and Lord of lords. You can either come to know Him as Savior and Lord in this life or meet Him as Judge in the afterlife. Those who ignore or reject God's provision of salvation—Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God—will be eternally separated from God's presence. Those who receive Him will rule and reign with Him throughout eternity.

John 5:24 guarantees:

> Truly, truly, I say to you, the one who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life.

When you accept God's free gift of salvation your name is written in the Book of Life. Have you committed your life to Jesus Christ? Is your name written in the Book of Life? If you do not willingly make Him Lord of your life, Scripture emphatically and strongly warns of eternal consequences:

> And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband...and nothing unclean...shall ever come into it, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life (Revelation 21:2-27).

> And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:15).

Revelation chapters 21 and 22 give a glimpse of the incredible things in store for those who receive the Lord Jesus Christ! The apostle John gives a final invitation and offer of salvation:

> The Spirit and the bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost (Revelation 22:17).

Experience His Reality

Years ago, by God's grace, I chose to commit my life to Jesus Christ. Making a 180-degree turn, I began following Him as Savior and Lord. It is called repentance—dying to self and living for Christ. I asked His forgiveness for my life of rebellion and sin, and I acknowledged His rightful position as Lord of my life. I obeyed His Word by being baptized and developed a consistent life of Bible study, prayer, and fellowship with other believers. I strive to live for the Lord with all my heart, with all my mind, and with all my strength.

You, too, can have new life in Christ. Repent and believe in the Lord Jesus. As one whose name is written in the Lamb's Book of Life, you will inherit all that God has prepared for those who love Him and obey His Word. Once you experience a life-changing faith in Jesus Christ, you will want to grow in this new relationship and begin uncovering the depths of the treasures of wisdom and knowledge in Him and His Word.

How you answer the questions, "Who is this Jesus?" and "How can I know Him?" are eternally significant.

John 3:16 is undeniable:

> For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

I do hope you will join me and the millions of others throughout history whose lives have been dramatically changed through the transforming power of the resurrected Christ. Surrender your life to Him today. Experience His peace and the joy that transcends your circumstances—and have hope for the life to come. Receiving Him as Savior and Lord will be the wisest and most courageous decision you

will ever make. Living fully for Him is the most exciting, challenging, and fulfilling life you can live.

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1. Kenneth L. Barker and John R. Kohlenberger III, eds., Zondervan NIV Bible Commentary: Vol. 2, New Testament, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994, p. 1223.

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